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Study sees funds roadblock for mountain highway

Funding obstacles seen for highway

By Jim Skeen, Staff Writer

PALMDALE - A 23-mile highway through the San Gabriel Mountains would cost \$3.1 billion and a toll operation wouldn't even pay for half, according to a study commissioned by Palmdale and Los Angeles County.

The study by URS Corp. concluded that cobbling together funding could take 15 years to 20 years. The study also concluded that charging motorists tolls would likely raise \$1.45 billion over 30 years, making the project unattractive to private investors.

While the cost of building an alternative to the crowded Antelope Valley Freeway is formidable, supporters such as **Palmdale Councilman Mike Dispenza** said it still has merits as the region faces growth projected to boost the population to more than 700,000 people by 2020.

"If we had the money today it would still be 20 to 25 years out. I won't live to see it," Dispenza said last week. "Let's begin to lay the groundwork to do what we need to do to support growth in this valley."

If such a highway could overcome financial, engineering and environmental issues, it would provide a new northern outlet for congested Los Angeles traffic, add a third connection for the Antelope Valley beyond highways 14 and 138 and create access for future air travelers to reach the Palmdale airport, Palmdale officials said.

The highway would face intense environmental scrutiny because about 90 percent of it would lie in Angeles National Forest.

In addition, its southern end is proposed to join the Glendale Freeway by a tunnel beneath homes in La Caada Flintridge, where residents and officials have regularly voiced objections to past highway plans.

"Anything that drops more traffic onto the 210 is opposed by the city of La Canada Flintridge," said Fred Buss, La Canada Flintridge's senior planner. "This would greatly increase traffic on the 210."

The idea of tunneling a highway through the steep San Gabriel Mountains has been raised a number of times over the past 20 years, including in 1999 by the regional planning body the **Southern California Association of Governments**.

The URS study determined that an all-tunnel highway was impractical, boosting the cost by nearly 50 percent. Because of elevation changes, an additional truck climbing lane would have to be added inside the tunnel's northern end of the highway, adding about \$1.5 billion to the cost.

However, the study said a "hybrid" highway of conventional roads plus lengthy tunnel segments could be done. The longest tunnel would be five miles.

"Under this concept, not only would the longest single tunnel segment be reduced to a manageable five miles, the steepest climbing would be accomplished using the at-grade road segments (where adding a climbing lane would not prove cost-prohibitive)," the report said. "The tunnel segments would be constructed at lower grades in order to be negotiable by trucks without significant loss of speed."

The study shows the northern end of the highway starting on the Antelope Valley Freeway northeast of Acton, near the Soledad Canyon Road exit.

Palmdale officials said they would look to other entities and grants to fund additional studies for the highway. The cost of conducting a major feasibility study for the project is estimated to cost about \$2 million to \$3 million.

"We've taken it to a point where other region entities need to take it to the next level," Mayor Jim Ledford said. "It's something that needs to be on the radar screen, but it is not a priority."

The more pressing needs are to get the Antelope Valley Freeway and Highway 138 widened and to get the proposed east-west High Desert Corridor highway built, Ledford said.